

STATEMENT OF THE UNITED STATES COAST GUARD
BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON LABOR,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FAMILY, DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

June 27, 1985
DRUG USE IN THE MILITARY

The U. S. Coast Guard has a strong antidrug program based on the position that illegal use or possession of drugs constitutes a serious breach of discipline which will not be tolerated. In support of this position, the Coast Guard has developed an extensive drug urinalysis testing program for all of its military personnel. This program has the dual purpose of deterring Service members from a life-style that is not compatible with the goals of the Coast Guard and injurious to the members' health, and the positive detection of those using illegal drugs in order to separate them from the service as expeditiously as possible. The urinalysis program is an integral part of the Coast Guard efforts to deter drug usage by training, inspection, and observation. As a consequence of this program, the Coast Guard has witnessed a decrease in the number of positive confirmatory urinalysis tests from 103 per 1,000 in 1983 to 22 per 1,000 for the first half of 1985.

Each Service member undergoes a comprehensive training program which includes the Coast Guard policy on drug abuse, the physical and psychological damages of drug abuse, and the sources of self-help and assistance in maintaining a life-style free from involvement with, and exposure to, drugs. To reinforce this training, each command has a Drug and Alcohol Abuse Representative who assists both the command and the member in maintaining a drug free Service environment.

Because of the strong commitment that users of illegal drugs do not belong in the Coast Guard, any member found to have been involved in a drug incident must be processed for separation. A General Discharge is specified for possession or use, with less creditable forms of discharge for the more severe cases, such as drug trafficking.

The urinalysis program tests for seven drugs: amphetamines, barbiturates, cocaine, methaqualone, opiates, phencyclidine (PCP), and THC (marijuana). Because of concerns for passive inhalation of marijuana, a level of 50 NG/ML or greater of Δ 9 THC has been defined as evidence of intentional use of this substance and constitutes a "drug incident." A reported level of Δ 9 THC between 20 NG/ML and 49 NG/ML, while below the specified level for discharge or dismissal, does indicate the member may be conducting a life-style which both endangers his or her health and is incompatible with our policy on drug abuse. These members undergo a 6-month period of retraining in drug awareness and weekly urinalysis testing until readings are zero and there is no further evidence of an incompatible life-style. This program is aimed at preventing a drug incident and helping the member towards a career in the Coast Guard.

The programs described above, which have been successful in reducing the drug incidents with Coast Guard men and women, are the culmination of 5 years constant effort to reduce the use of illegal drugs, from offering rehabilitation upon a member's disclosure of past drug use to today's policy of unequivocal separation of identified users. A short history of this change in policy will explain the evolution of the drug urinalysis program.

From 1980 to 1982, the Coast Guard Drug Exemption Program encouraged members to seek rehabilitation by voluntary disclosure of past illegal drug use. A commanding officer's grant of a one-time exemption, following disclosure, precluded disciplinary action and administrative action other than an honorable discharge. Rehabilitation for members who were retained included counselling, education, and inpatient treatment at U. S. Navy facilities for members diagnosed as drug-dependent. Users detected without voluntary disclosure were subject to disciplinary or adverse administrative action. The Drug Exemption Program failed to convince members using illegal drugs to seek help and cease their misconduct. Very few drug-dependent members were identified or treated and the incidence of drug use did not appear to decline as a result of the program.

At that time, the primary method of detecting illegal drugs was evidence of possession, as no reliable large-scale techniques were available for detecting drug usage by a member. During 1982, however, drug urinalysis screening tests were developed which were capable of being locally administered by commands.

With the availability of screening tests which could be locally administered, and the realization that rehabilitation of drug users was only marginally successful at best, the Drug Exemption Program was cancelled in April of 1982. In its place, the Coast Guard adopted a policy that "illegal use or possession of drugs constitutes a serious breach of discipline which will not be tolerated." Under this policy, chief petty officers and commissioned officers were normally separated from the Service on the first drug incident. Junior enlisted personnel

could be retained following a first incident, but had to be provided counselling, education, and/or treatment if retained. As part of this revised policy, a General Discharge was specified as the administrative consequence of drug possession or use, with less creditable forms of discharge for severe cases.

In January 1983, the Coast Guard implemented a Servicewide Drug Urinalysis Testing Program. This program, which remains in effect, requires testing of recruits, Academy cadets, officer candidates, direct commissioned officers, and Class "A" School selectees. All other Service members are tested on a random basis or for probable cause. Samples are first tested for seven drugs by a screening method, then by gas chromatography with mass spectrometry (GC/MS) to confirm intentional drug use. Testing requirements include use of a laboratory certified for GC/MS testing of drugs by a Federal or state agency and maintenance of a complete chain of custody throughout the collection and testing process. Districts and ~~Headquarters units~~ contracted for urinalysis testing services at their level.

In July 1984, Coast Guard policy for disposition of drug users was further strengthened by requiring that any member involved in a drug incident be processed for separation. Commanding officers may recommend retention of E-3's and below to the Commandant in extraordinary cases. No such retentions have been authorized to date.

Also, in July 1984, the Coast Guard required collection of two samples per member. The second sample is stored at the command until the sample submitted to the laboratory tests negative, or until disciplinary

or administrative processing of positively confirmed members is complete. The second sample is available if the first is challenged in a Discharge Board or Court-martial for improper chain of custody or laboratory testing procedure. Commands have also tested second samples during discharge processing at the member's request.

In May 1985, the Coast Guard established the policy, previously discussed, of monitoring members whose confirmatory test result is 20-49 NG/ML of THC.

In July 1985, the Coast Guard will implement a Servicewide contract with a single laboratory for drug urinalysis testing. Servicewide contracting ensures fully standardized test procedures, removes administrative burdens from field commands, and will obtain a lower price per screening and confirmatory test through volume testing. The Coast Guard will test 125 percent of the active duty population per year on a random basis plus the mandatory tests noted previously. This totals 67,500 samples to be screened per year.

As noted previously, since implementation of the Drug Urinalysis Testing Program, the incidence of positive confirmatory tests has declined from 103 per 1,000 in FY 83 to 22 per 1,000 over the first half of FY 85.

Because of the policy changes tightening the retention standards to the current position of no retention of a drug offender, the number of drug-related discharges from the Coast Guard has continued to increase from FY 82 to the present. The most frequent disposition of drug users

has been administrative separation with a General Discharge, often preceded by nonjudicial punishment, rather than prosecution by court-martial. These avenues offer commanding officers their most expeditious means to rid their commands of drug users.